
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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| Landmark/District: | Capitol Hill Historic District | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda |
| Address: | 901 D Street, NE | <input type="checkbox"/> Consent |
| | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept |
| Meeting Date: | November 29, 2012 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration |
| Case Number: | 13-028 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction |
| Staff Reviewer: | Amanda Molson | <input type="checkbox"/> Demolition |
| | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Subdivision |

Applicant 901 D Street, LLC, with drawings prepared by R2L: Architects, PLLC, requests concept review for alterations, new construction, and a subdivision at the former Edmonds School site at 901 D Street, NE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Property Description

The James B. Edmonds School, located at 901 D Street, NE (corner of 9th and D) was constructed in 1903 according to designs prepared by architecture team of Marsh & Peter. Colonial Revival in its design, the building reflects the city’s preferred school building layout of the time, which featured two stories encompassing eight classrooms. Known as the “eight-room cartwheel plan,” the layout included playrooms and bathrooms for boys and girls in the basement. Four classrooms and their respective cloakrooms opened into a central hall on each of the upper floors.

During the mid twentieth-century, the lot was paved with concrete, including the formerly grassy areas fronting 9th Street and D Street. In the 1970s, a small concrete and brick plaza was added on the 9th Street side. The school was closed in 1979, and soon after it was taken over by the DC Teacher’s Credit Union, with this organization and others operating office space inside the building since. These groups are now relocating, and the site has become available for purchase.

Proposal

The applicants plan to convert the school building into residential units, which entails exterior restoration, interior alterations, construction of three new dormers, the relocation of mechanical equipment to the roof, and construction of several basement-level terraces.

Three new townhouses are proposed facing 9th Street. A second-story “bridge” element would be constructed between the school and townhouses, providing vehicular access to the rear parking lot under living space above. On D Street, the existing curb cut would be closed, and a new townhouse would be constructed. Although the remainder of the site would be retained on one lot, the D Street townhouse would be subdivided for a fee simple lot. Parking would be located in the southeast corner of the site, with a covered parking structure planned against the fence line.

Evaluation

Demolition

Just as the purpose of the city's preservation law is to retain and enhance those properties that contribute to the character of a historic district, so too does the law encourage their adaptation for current use. Purpose-built structures such as schools are often difficult to repurpose for residential use without interior modifications, and some moderate leniency regarding allowable demolition is warranted given the benefits to the neighborhood of seeing this building restored and put back to productive use.

The applicants have worked closely with HPO to limit the amount of interior demolition at the school in accordance with the Board's regulations, and the proposed extent is now within the Board's purview to approve. Although the project originally proposed removal of many of the building's interior walls, revisions have been made to retain key load-bearing walls in their entirety, to make openings in some existing walls for movement within the new units, and to keep and reincorporate the open space of the three entry foyers. Identified as being of particular significance by HPO are the masonry piers that form the central hallway on each of the upper floors, the walls that form the stair corridors, and the walls that created the original division between classrooms and cloakrooms. In examining the existing stair parts (railings, treads and risers, landings), it became apparent that they do not exhibit any distinguishing features. Understanding that all three stair corridors will no longer be needed as the building houses a handful of residents instead of many schoolchildren, the removal of stair parts and the inclusion of the west and east stair corridor spaces into units is reasonable.

Removal of some sections of the roof structure is also proposed to accommodate three new dormers, but it will not result in significant or substantial demolition of the roof structure. The central portion of the roof structure will also be removed in order to create a sunken area for the mechanical equipment within the attic space. Although the demolition of major structural components is discouraged, this proposal provides substantial aesthetic and sound-dampening benefits in that it allows for the relocation of equipment from the exterior of the building to the roof and allows that equipment to be out of view once installed.

Still of concern is that the plans show that a "choke point" will be created in the main entry foyer facing D Street, which entails the insertion of new walls, along with the creation of large openings in the existing masonry walls. HPO requested that the applicants remove this "choke point," keeping the flanking walls in their entirety and better preserving the sense of entry in this space. This change was not made on the plans submitted to the Board, and it remains a recommended change for the proposed scope of demolition work.

Alterations

This project offers a number of preservation benefits for the site and the neighborhood. The planned exterior restoration of the school will reinstate appropriate windows and doors based on the original Marsh & Peter drawings, repair and clean masonry, and replace the vast expanse of concrete with landscaping and lead walks. Additionally, the removal of the existing curb cut on D Street and the relocation of parking to the rear of the site will largely eliminate the massing of cars that currently dominate this elevation. The applicants have also been working with the affected telecom carrier to see if the cell antennas mounted on the exterior shaft can be relocated, allowing the removal of both visual intrusions. Together, these changes will be a long-awaited

and very welcome opportunity to reinstate the historic character of the school and to improve the aesthetic appeal of the site overall.

The building's original windows were replaced with vinyl units sometime within the last ten years (without the required permit). This change introduced an inappropriate material, inserted transom windows that shortened the proportions of the original double-hung windows, and utilized flat muntins sandwiched between two panes of glass. These replacement windows are one of the most incompatible features of the building today, and their planned replacement as part of this project will improve the building's historic character. The demolition plans include a note that the new windows will match the originals, and the applicants should work with HPO to review detailed specifications and the method of installation. Likewise, the original doors were removed at some point in the past, and the plan to install appropriately-sized and designed new doors and transoms is commended.

The Marsh & Peter plans for the school clearly show four dormers on the roof. For unknown reasons, only one dormer was built, and the visual result is somewhat unbalanced and appears unfinished. The proposal to construct the three other dormers, commensurate with the design of the existing dormer and the details shown in the original plans, is compatible and consistent with the original design intent. Adding these elements now fulfills the original vision and better responds to the overall symmetry of the building. If replacement of the roof covering is planned, details on the proposed material should be included in the final plans.

The applicants have proposed the addition of several basement-level terraces to serve units at these levels. The terraces would be accessed via existing windows, the sills of which would be dropped to create door openings. Although the Board's design guidelines for basement areaways discourage the creation of sunken terraces, some flexibility is warranted here. This has become a fairly typical design element of school reuse projects in the neighborhood over time (they have been introduced at Carbery, Lenox, Bryan, and Logan schools), and it was not uncommon for school buildings to have basement access areaways of some size. Additionally, many former public school buildings are sited on a slight or generous berm, allowing a visual buffer, and the sheer size of these buildings allows their massing to maintain a strong connection to the ground even with some below-grade disturbances.

HPO asked the applicants to pull the terrace width on the D Street elevation away from the main entrance by the equivalent of one bay. The terraces currently flanking the main entry doors are wider than the others proposed, bringing them closer to the lead walk and building entrance. Considering the prominence of the D Street elevation, which was the public entrance to the school originally, excavation should be pulled well away from the doors and generous landscaping provided between the well and the entry landing. This change was not made in the plans submitted for Board consideration, and it remains a concern.

Additionally, HPO asked that details be provided on the planned railings for the basement terraces. Though the side profile of a 42" railing appears in the section drawing (p. 15), railings do not appear in any of the perspective renderings or elevation drawings. Though the installation of a railing is likely fine if heavily screened by plantings, the proposed material and design of the railing cannot be evaluated at this time.

New construction

The proposal to add four new townhouses is compatible with the character of the site. The new construction replaces existing parking, a curb cut and driveway, and the plaza area fronting 9th Street. The townhouses facing 9th Street have been designed as three-story plus basement brick bay-front houses commensurate with the traditional design of Capitol Hill rowhouses. Though taller than the historic porch-front homes that they will abut, the additional height provides a more graceful transition to the much taller school building and is comparable to many houses in the neighborhood. The proposed brick coursing and decorative panels help to break down the massing and add visual interest. As the plans are further developed, the cornice should be studied further in order to provide the visual weight that the brackets and detailing seem to suggest.

The house facing D Street has been designed as three stories with a front porch, roughly the same height as the porch-front house to the left. The general massing and design direction are certainly compatible with other approved infill projects on Capitol Hill, but the proportions seem unresolved. Though the new townhouse holds the height of the adjoining building and the eaves of the school, the desire for a full three stories plus basement has resulted in a front entry and porch that sit below that of the next-door neighbor. This house understandably attempts to complete the row, but it falls short in its relationship to neighboring window, door, and porch proportions. Better solutions may be to design a two-story plus mansard house, set at the same grade as the abutting building, to remove the porch to create a less jarring relationship, to move to a bay-front design similar to the planned houses facing 9th Street, or to reorganize the façade in some other way. Though the house is one part of a much larger project, careful attention should be paid to its design as it impacts the streetscape considerably.

The planned connector between the school building and the new houses facing 9th Street has been suitably recessed from the façade by around 30', allowing much of the side wall of the school to remain exposed. The connector continues the height of the new townhouses but remains below the school's eaves, allowing it to be visually subordinate. Because no proposed side elevation of the school was provided, it is not possible to discern how the connector engages with the school building. Of potential concern is its impact on the decorative medallions just below the eaves of the school's roof, details that continue around the periphery of the building. Looking at the renderings (p. 12), it appears that the connector may engage at a point that intersects the decorative medallions, potentially damaging them. The height of the connector should be located below the medallions and the brick course directly below it, with this detail shown in a proposed drawing of the south-facing elevation.

HPO requested elevation drawings for the new construction but has received only those for the facades. When the applicants return for further Board consideration, proposed side and rear elevation drawings for the new construction townhouses, along with the rear elevation of the vehicular access bridge, should be included.

Additionally, further details are needed in order to evaluate the proposed covered parking structure and deck in the parking lot. At present, there is no information provided other than the footprint, so it is not possible to gauge the proposed height, materials, or overall design. As part of this review, photographs should be also provided showing this area of the site.

Details should also be provided on proposed fencing in the public and private right-of-ways, materials proposed for lead walks and retaining walls, and the planned location of utility meters.

Subdivision

The proposal to subdivide out the new townhouse on D Street raises no preservation issues. The abutting rowhouse has no side windows, allowing for the insertion of this new building at the end of the row. The proposed lot size is comparable to others in the neighborhood, and the building is sited on the lot in a manner that appropriately extends the street face. Once constructed, the townhouse will be located a relatively generous 9'-2" from the side of the school, an opening size that retains breathing space between the two structures while also being shallow enough to ensure that another house cannot be built directly against or closer to the school at a later time.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Find the proposed subdivision to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff;*
- *Find the proposed alteration of the historic building to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff, with the condition that the interior stair corridor walls facing D Street be retained in their entirety;*
- *Find the proposed site plan and general massing to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act;*
- *Direct the applicants to restudy and expand the plans based on the above comments and return to the Board for further review of the design when appropriate;*
- *Condition these findings on the understanding that they should not be construed as approval for any necessary zoning relief.*